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C O N F I D E N T I A L RABAT 002296

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TAGS: PREL PBTS PHUM MO

SUBJECT: URGING MFA TO REACH OUT ON SAHARA AND DEFEND
FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Classified By: Classified by CDA Wayne Bush for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

1.(C) Summary: Charge and political counselor called on MFA Director General for Bilateral Affairs Youssef Amrani December 19 to review a range of bilateral and multilateral issues. The Charge stressed the need for a credible autonomy plan for the Western Sahara based on the broadest possible consultation with the Sahrawi people. He reminded Amrani of the USG offer to facilitate talks with the Polisario, and said that to secure U.S. and international support for its autonomy proposal Morocco would need to demonstrate that it had left no stone unturned in seeking broad Sahrawi input. He emphasized the importance of Moroccan respect for human rights, and ensuring that there was no disconnect in this regard between the vision of the leadership in Rabat and the police forces on the ground. The Charge also raised U.S. interest in moving forward the anti-money laundering bill and press code reform, and signaled concerns about draft legislation to regulate public opinion polling in Morocco. Amrani pointed to the CORCAS as ensuring Sahrawi consultation on the autonomy proposal, but took on board the value of discussion with the Polisario. He defended Morocco as a democratic beacon in the region, and emphasized that the money laundering bill and press reform are moving ahead. He said a polling law was needed, noting the Interior Minister's views that inaccurate polling had created the impression of an "Islamic tidal wave" resulting from the next election, but added that the GOM is sensitive to concerns. End summary.

Sahara: Consulting broadly and preserving human rights

2.(C) Amrani noted he had joined Minister Delegate Fassi Fihri in discussing Morocco's efforts to develop an autonomy plan with U.S. officials in Amman. As discussed, Amrani said, Fassi Fihri plans to visit Washington to discuss the autonomy plan next month. The Charge emphasized that Morocco had a tremendous opportunity now to make progress on the Sahara issue, one it should not miss. He drew Amrani's attention to previous U.S. observations about an autonomy plan. It needed to be credible, and Morocco needed to broadly consult with Sahrawis on the plan. The USG was prepared to facilitate discussion with the Polisario. Fassi Fihri's meetings in Washington would be most productive if he could show a solid plan that was the result of broad consultation. We didn't believe this had yet taken place, notwithstanding Amrani's claim that the CORCAS effort represented broad Sahrawi consultation. Amrani asked for USG pressure on Algeria.

¶3. (C) The Charge also stressed the need for the GOM to visibly demonstrate respect for human rights in the Western

Sahara. It was important to ensure that police forces on the ground faithfully implemented the expressed vision of the Moroccan leadership in this regard. He underlined that Morocco's human rights record and actions would color the reaction of the international community to its autonomy proposal. In response to a question, Polcouns specified that there were concerns about reports of beatings and arrests of persons participating in a non-violent demonstration making International Human Rights Day. The GOM would have to win hearts and minds of the people in the Western Sahara, which is complicated by repressive tactics. While insisting that the GOM was fully respecting rights in the Western Sahara, Amrani protested the need to confront violent protesters, but acknowledged that there might be some lapses on the ground.

Press code and Polling

¶4. (C) Charge noted that he and MCC official Michael Grossman had met the previous evening with Prime Minister Jettou, principally on Millennium Challenge (MCC) issues (septel). As part of that discussion, Charge had noted the importance of several articles of legislation. The U.S. urges the passage of the revisions to the press code including decriminalization of libel. Secretary Rice had raised this with Minister Benaissa in October. In addition, the Charge expressed concern about draft legislation that would regulate polling, including instituting some criminal penalties. The bill in its current form would be a step in the wrong direction with regard to freedom of expression.

5.(C) Amrani asserted that reform was a keystone of GOM domestic policy and that it was "irreversible." Morocco remains the beacon of reform in the region, he said, but

noted the need also for stability -- citing Hamas and Iraq. The GOM was working on reform of the press code with the press union. As for the polling bill, he noted Morocco had no law regulating polling, and needed one to protect consumers. He said legislation had been discussed in a meeting with senior Moroccan officials by a European Ambassador. He said that Interior Minister Benmoussa had replied that the government could not accept that misleading public opinion polls had created the perception of an "Islamic tidal wave" resulting from next year's elections (comment: a likely reference to last summer's IRI poll controversy). Nevertheless, Amrani anticipated the upcoming elections would be democratic, fully transparent and well-run.

Money Laundering

¶6. (C) The Charge also underscored the importance of passage of pending anti-money laundering legislation. Amrani checked with the MFA expert on the bill, who confirmed the legislation was currently with Parliament and the MGA was not aware of any further obstacle to speedy passage by both houses of parliament.

Forum for the Future

¶7. (C) Amrani, one of the moving forces behind the original FFF held in Morocco, had appreciated the opportunity to engage with US officials at the Amman forum. As to the Forum itself, the issue about the location of the next meeting remained to be resolved, he said. Amrani accepted USG concern about Qatar, had reservations about Yemen, and thought the UAE would possibly be a good host. He was dismayed by Saudi delegate's "19th Century" intervention about the pace of reform. It remained important for the FFF to be as inclusive as possible, Amrani emphasized. The involvement of civil society remained an important strength of the FFF, even though the NGOs made a lot of noise. Before the FFF, civil society and governments in the region never talked to each other, Amrani said. Morocco would show its continuing support for the FFF and reform in general by hosting a Foundation Board meeting in Marrakech in April.

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Bush